

Written Testimony to Connecticut Appropriations Committee

February 17, 2017

To: Senator Osten, Senator Formica, Representative Walker, Representative Ziobron and members of the Appropriations Committee

From: Steve Sigel, Executive Director; Garde Arts Center, New London
860-444-4410, sigel@gardearts.org

Re: Legislatively Directed Funds for Garde Arts Center in the 2018-19 Biennial Budget

I am Steve Sigel, a resident of New London, and for the past 29 year's executive director of the Garde Arts Center, southeastern Connecticut's non-profit regional center for the performing arts and education in downtown New London.

Once again I, along with my colleague performing arts centers throughout the State, come before this Committee to beseech you to stop the continued bleeding and the economic harm that has resulted from, and will be irretrievably exacerbated by, the proposed further diminution of the already excessively underfunded investment in the arts, which currently comprises a paltry .03% (3/100ths of 1%) of the entire State budget.

In its wisdom, the legislature has seen the benefit of direct support to the Garde and its sister institutions which are aggregated in two fund accounts:

Performing Arts Centers, and Performing Theaters Grants. We believe that the legislature deserves to maintain its autonomy and prerogative to streamline and direct State investment to urban performing arts facilities. **We ask you to ensure that those accounts remain intact with at least the existing funds available**, of which the Garde's allocation is \$155,960, an unfortunate 45% reduction from the previous budget.

The Governor's budget apparently eliminates these legislative initiatives, significantly reduces the dollars saved, and reallocates the balance for discretionary use by the Department of Economic and Community Development. The Governor's proposed budget would create irremediable negative short- and long-term consequences.

Downtown performing arts facilities are unique as community-owned non-profit regional activity generators. They are especially effective as year-round catalysts for the State's economic, cultural, housing, transportation, education, tourism, historic preservation and social service goals.

Urban performing arts centers own and operate critical downtown structures that are providing the connective tissue and stimulus to small businesses, public

schools, major industry, and invention and innovation, at a time when creativity, cross-sector collaboration, and regional connection are the essential tools for economic recovery.

The Garde Arts Center has been nationally acclaimed for its creative economic, educational, and civic development strategies, and as a model of inventive and collaborative success in fueling the region's creative economy, due in no small part to the State's investment. This June, in fact we are honored to be representing the City and State as the primary host location for a New England Foundation for the Arts biennial conference on the strategies used in successful creative economy initiatives around New England.

Since 1988, the Garde has been the prime community-owned cultural activity generator and economic catalyst for the City of New London and Southeastern Connecticut in its nationally-acclaimed historic theater and adjacent properties at the gateway to the heart of downtown New London. In recent years, legislatively-directed support, during a time of severe fiscal challenges for this City and New London County, has helped maintain the Garde's activity level, facility access and the resultant economic boost to New London and the region, thereby also protecting the investment that the State has made in the Garde and Downtown New London.

In the past two years, the Garde will have served over 120,000 constituents, presenting and hosting 400 days of performances, film, civic events, meetings, and rehearsals. With its diverse presenting program of Broadway, dance, opera, symphony orchestra, contemporary music, variety acts, school-time performances and film, the Garde served primarily 63 towns in greater New London County. The largest cultural employer in the City and the region, the Garde provides jobs and internships throughout the year for production staff, stage crew, event managers, area students and local artists.

Based on multipliers from the CT Arts and Economic Report IV, the Garde's annual economic impact exceeded \$5,000,000 including audience spending, household income impact, and state and local revenues, and created 93 FTE jobs in the region, a very high return for a modest \$155,960 investment.

With direct legislative funding, the Garde has been able to open its doors providing office space, program partnerships and production services as well as the main public venue for numerous local arts and civic organizations. As headquarters for New London Film Commission and partnerships with the CT Film Office, the Garde has facilitated new film development in the City and region, including the world premiere screenings of new CT-based films. Because of legislative support, the Garde has become an important partner in the development and realization of the new US National Coast Guard Museum to be built down the street from our facilities.

Whether providing the venue and funding support for community responses to recent teen violence, such as the New London Youth Talent Show, partnering with the CT Department of Education and OPM in planning magnet school performing arts facilities and programs, or educating and involving more than 10,000 young people each year with performances, workshops, and after-school and summer programs, your reinvestment in the Garde each year provides multiple and multiplying returns to every aspect of the City's and region's economic and educational quality of life.

We ask you to protect and maintain, at the very least, within the budget line entitled Performing Theaters Grants, the remaining \$155,960 allocation to the Garde, which is a 50% cut from the previous biennial budget.

We look forward to working with you closely and appreciate your continued support and investment in the Garde, and the arts throughout the State.

Thank you for your leadership.

Steve Sigel, Executive Director, Garde Arts Center
325 State Street
New London, CT 06320
860-444-4410, sigel@gardearts.org